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ABSTRACT

Intended as a practical guide for grandparents raising their grandchildren, this book contains information and ideas about meeting grandchildren's needs and vignettes describing the coping strategies of many grandparents. The book consists of five chapters. Chapter 1, "Finding Help, Growing in Hope," describes reasons for grandparents raising their grandchildren, discusses normal feelings of anger, sadness, and stress, and provides information about the Grandparent Information Center operated by the American Association of Retired Persons. Chapter 2, "If Your Grandchild Was Abused, Neglected, or Abandoned," discusses the role of child welfare agencies in a question-answer format. Chapter 3, "Getting Help with Expenses," looks at government programs which may help to provide support for grandchildren, including Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Medicaid, food stamps, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EIC), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and special needs adoption subsidies. Chapter 4, "Getting Help from the Legal System," explains the legal process and what it can and cannot do for grandparents raising their grandchildren, including custody and child support issues. Chapter 5, "Meeting Your Grandchild's Needs," describes benefits and services to which grandchildren may be entitled, discusses common problems, and suggests how other grandparents have coped. (DR)

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Grandparents Raising Grandchildren:

A guide to finding help and hope

Marianne Takas

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A guide to finding help and hope

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This book reflects the help of many dedicated people. Sincere thanks go to Renee Woodworth and Faith Mullen of the American Association of Retired Persons, River Ginchild of Legal Services for Prisoners with Children, Randi Mandelbaum of Georgetown University Law Center, Mark Hardin of the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, Janet Sainer and Nora O'Brien of the Brookdale Foundation, and, above all...

...to the many grandparents and grandchildren whose ideas, strengths, and wisdom inform this book.

Any opinions expressed in this book are those of the author, and do not reflect official positions of the National Foster Parent Association or the Brookdale Foundation Group.

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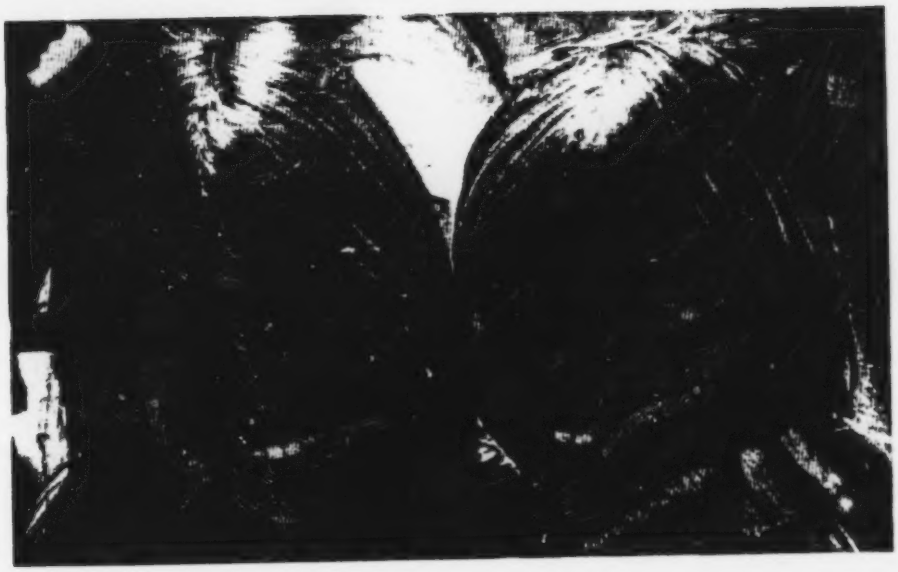
CHAPTER ONE:
FINDING HELP,
GROWING IN HOPE



Are you raising your grandchildren? You're not alone. Today, nearly a million families in the U.S. are made up of grandparents raising their grandchildren. In fact, almost onchild in twenty lives in a home headed by a grandparent, without the parents there.

As you raise your grandchildren:

- You may feel shocked and sad about the family problems that caused your grandchildren to need you.
- You may have less energy than when you were raising your own children.
- Your grandchildren may have behavior problems or need extra help, especially if they were abused or neglected before they came to you.
- You may need help with expenses or housing.
- Your grandchildren's parents may want to take the children places -- or even want the children back -- but may not keep them safe.
- You may need to use the legal system, but find it expensive and unfriendly.
- If your grandchildren were abused or neglected, social workers may be involved. That may be a help, but may also feel uncomfortable.

How this booklet can help

This booklet is written for grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. It has information and ideas about:

- Meeting your grandchildren's needs
- Common problems you may face
- How other grandparents have solved these problems
- Services and support groups that can help
- Cash benefits you or your grandchildren may have a right to receive
- Making decisions about legal issues
- Services for children who have been abused, neglected, or abandoned

A proud tradition. There have always been grandparents raising grandchildren. Sometimes this is so the parents can work or go to school. More often it's because the parents have serious problems, have abandoned the children, or have died. Many children have been helped by grandparents who cared for them.

Today, more grandparents than ever are raising their grandchildren. Often it's a crisis that makes them needed. One or both of the parents may be:

- Addicted to drugs
- Alcoholic
- A teenager
- Seriously ill
- Violent
- In jail, missing or dead

Even if your grandchildren need you for very sad reasons, you can still have a good life with them. You can take pride in knowing that you are helping them through hard times and giving them a fresh start. Many of our finest citizens were raised by grandparents -- and are the better for it.

Raising grandchildren can be very hard, but it also has its joys. True, you can't send your grandchildren home Sunday night and get your rest. But if you did, you'd never see that Monday morning smile, or hear the Tuesday afternoon laughter, or feel the Friday night hug.

Some days the stress may feel like too much. But at least you've had more practice than when you were raising your own children. With time, you may find you have strengths you never knew you had.

Finding help. You're doing an important job, and you deserve help, friendship and support. If you make the effort to find it, you'll feel less alone. You may also be better able to help your grandchildren.

There may be a support group in your community for grandparents raising grandchildren. Most groups are free of charge, and can be a good place to get information, ideas, and emotional support. Don't worry that others in the group will judge you or your family. Chances are, others in the group have felt what you're feeling now. You may find it helpful just to hear how others are feeling, and how they are solving problems in their families. Most groups are also a good place to learn about services in your community that can help you.

The Grandparent Information Center
of the American Association of Retired Persons

If you want to find a local support group for grandparents raising grandchildren, the Grandparent Information Center can help you. They have a listing of over 300 groups around the country, and more groups are added all the time. They can also put you on their newsletter mailing list, send helpful booklets, help you to start a new group, or help you find other services you need. To reach the Center, call 202-434-2296 weekdays from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Eastern Standard Time.

A Grandmother's Story

Nell Jones loved being a mother, but she was glad when her three children were grown. Grandchildren, though -- that would be great. She'd have all the fun and few of the worries.

It didn't work out that way. When Nell's daughter, Mandy, was nineteen, problems began. Mandy went for walks and got lost. She got in fights. She even began hearing voices that weren't there. Mandy had mental illness, the doctors said. She also was pregnant. If Mandy knew who the father was, she wasn't telling.

Today Mandy's daughter, Olivia, is a lively three-year-old, who's been raised since birth by Nell and her husband, Jim. Mandy lives in a halfway house for young adults with mental illness, and visits the family on weekends. Nell loves her granddaughter, but she gets so tired. Every day, she prays for strength.

"Sometimes I feel angry," says Nell. "We have so many worries, and money is so tight. We see other people our age who can relax and enjoy themselves, and it doesn't seem fair. But then I look at Olivia, and I'm thankful that we're able to do this. When we're gone, at least we'll have made a difference in Olivia's life."

Coping with anger and sadness. It's natural to feel sad and angry, especially if you feel your adult child has let you and your grandchildren down. "Nobody forced my daughter to take drugs," said one heartbroken grandmother. "It breaks my heart seeing my grandbaby suffering from the way his mother treated him."

A grandfather, raising the children of his crack-addicted daughter, spoke with tears in his voice. "Sometimes at night, I hear a siren or a woman screaming. I wonder is it my daughter in trouble out there. I try to do my best for the little ones, but I'm scared for them, too."

At times, you may hurt so much it seems you just can't bear it. Yet even the most painful feelings fade with time. You can talk them out with others. You can pray or take quiet moments to relax. You may find comfort from a support group, counseling, or other services discussed in this book.

You may also start feeling better when you see progress. As the children do better in your care, you'll feel pride and relief.

As you raise your grandchildren, it is completely natural if you feel:

- Angry
- Sad
- Afraid for the children
- Worried you can't cope

Much as they hurt, feelings of sadness or anger won't break you. Try to be patient, and remember that the worst of the pain will pass.

Stress Busters

Whatever you do, don't forget to take care of yourself! When grandparents start raising grandchildren, it's common for stress-related health problems to start or get worse. You can help keep it from happening to you -- and stay strong for your grandchildren -- by taking care of yourself now.

- See your doctor regularly and follow his or her advice.
- At least three times a week, try to spend twenty minutes walking quickly and quietly.
- Insist on a regular "quiet hour" in your household, whether it's naptime for infants or stereo (with earphones) for teens.
- Take the children places that are restful for you. A park with playground or a public pool can be nice, as long as they're not too crowded.
- Look for places where your grandchildren can enjoy time apart from you (and you can enjoy the break). "Story hour" at your local library might be a good choice for youngsters, while community centers or groups like YMCA, YWCA, or Boys and Girls Clubs may have programs for older children and teens. Many programs are free or low cost.

Helping your grandchildren to understand their parents.

Making peace with the children's parents may be one of your biggest challenges. You may be thinking, "Why bother? They're the problem. The further they stay away the better!" Or you may be so worried about the parents that you're anxious all the time.

It is possible to find a good balance. If a parent is trying to solve his or her problems, you can help by offering praise and caring. If you know of services of that might help (like a drug treatment program that helped someone you know), you could pass on the idea. But it's not your job to "fix" the parent -- even your son or daughter.

For your grandchildren's sake, it *is* important to help, if possible, to make their parents a positive part of their life. This means:

- **Setting limits.** If a parent shows up drunk or high and wants to take your grandchild for a ride, it's not okay. The child's safety must come first.

- **Encouraging the good.** Even if the parents have fallen short in many ways, they are still important to the children. If there are ways that your grandchildren can safely spend time with a parent -- for example, at your home or another relative's -- this will be a big help to the children.

- **Being an example.** It's natural to feel angry toward the parents, but harsh words in front of your grandchildren will only hurt them. Try to explain the parents' problems as kindly as you can, and to find something -- anything -- good you can truthfully say.

How this helps your grandchild. If the parents are completely gone from family life, or are seen as all "bad", it's very hard on a child. The child begins to wonder, "Am I bad, too?" A more settled relationship -- even if limited -- can help your grandchild become a happier and stronger person.

The tough part is that the parents may be hard to deal with. They may say hurtful things, or may plan visits and then not show up. You may feel worried, angry or sad, and not know what to say. Talking over problems like these at your grandparent support group can help. You may also want to look in your local phone book for:

- **Al-Anon Family Groups.** If your grandchild's parent is involved with drugs or alcohol, the self-help group Al-Anon can be a wonderful help to you. Meetings are free of charge, and are held in communities throughout the U.S.

- **Family mediation services.** There may be local services, free or low cost, to help families work out agreements about the care of children. Try calling any local community centers, and also the local court that handles custody agreements, and asking if they offer family mediation services.

- **Family counseling.** Many health centers offer family counseling, which can help solve problems and improve relationships. Ask if there are sliding scale fees or whether any health coverage you have will cover the cost.

If you can't find a program, asks others at your grandparent support group.

When a Parent has Died

One of the saddest and most painful situations a grandparent can face is helping a child deal with the death of a parent. There are no easy answers, but there are ways to help.

- Let your grandchild grieve. It's natural for your grandchildren to feel deep sadness, loss, fear, and even anger. Talking -- and crying -- can help. Many children need and can benefit from counseling, a support group, or other special programs for children who've lost parents. Check with local mental health programs and community listings in your local paper.

- Let yourself grieve. You've had a loss, too, especially if the parent who died was your child. Look for support for you, from friends, support groups, or counseling. It's good to be honest with your grandchildren about the sadness you're feeling, but try not to use them as your support system.

- Help your grandchild to remember, but also to move on. Your grandchild may be comforted by making an album, writing stories, or any other activity that helps keep the parent real and remembered. Don't worry if many memories are sad ones, but do try to focus on the good.

If a Parent is in Prison

Another painful situation is when a parent enters or is in prison. It's very tempting to let that be the end of all parent/child contact, at least until the parent gets out, but that's usually a mistake. More than ever, your grandchild will be struggling with feelings of loss, fear for the parent, and shame. Keeping that prison door from slamming too hard can be the best way to help. Hard as it is, many grandparents who've been there recommend these ideas:

- Help your grandchildren to write letters and send pictures, and invite the parent to write back.

- Some prisons have programs to help children visit comfortably, and may even have other services such as family support groups. To find out, call the prison and ask to speak to visitor services, social services, or the prison chaplain.

- Explain honestly, but gently, that your grandchild's parent broke a law, and this is the result -- just as your grandchild might get a "time out" for breaking a family rule. But also explain that it was a mistake, and doesn't mean the parent is a bad person.

Life with your grandchildren. Caring for your grandchildren is hard work. You can't do everything. All you can do is your best.

- You *can't* keep your grandchild from feeling sad or angry. You *can* offer your grandchild care and understanding, and help find counseling if needed.

- You *can't* make your grandchild a better student overnight. You *can* help with homework, read together, limit television, and work with your grandchild's school.

- You *can't* make your grandchild's parents get better. You *can* suggest drug treatment or other services you think might help, and encourage them if they go.

- You *can't* do everything right, any more than any parent can. You *can* get services and supports to help you do your best with all the challenges.

There's relief in knowing that you can't -- and needn't -- do everything. You can take pride in doing your best.

The Road to Hope

When Clara Davis is singing in her church choir, her face shines with warmth and gladness. Her grandchildren, Tabika and Jason, sit with the youth choir. It's Family Sunday at the church, and it's packed with eager, bright-eyed African-American boys and girls.

That peaceful warmth seems a part of Clara, but it wasn't always. "Three years ago," she says, "I thought we wouldn't make it. My daughter and her children had such troubles, and I knew I didn't have the strength or the smarts to set it all right."

Clara, a nurse, and her husband Frank, a skilled machinist, had three children. Their oldest daughter now works for city government, and their son is a nurse. Their middle child, Laura, the mother of Tabika and Jason, is a recovering drug addict.

"Do you know what it's like to see your daughter dying?" asks Clara. "Yet, there I was, my heart breaking for her, and still I was so furious I almost couldn't talk to her." Before the children came to their grandparents, Tabika had been sexually abused, and Jason physically abused, by Laura's latest boyfriend. Laura knew of the abuse but, depending on the boyfriend for drugs, said nothing.

When the children came to live with their grandparents, there were new troubles. Tabika had nightmares, and would wake up screaming. Jason was failing in school. Then Tabika and Jason began to work out their anger against their mother by blaming Clara. Clara loved them, but began to feel used.

When asked what's changed, how the family could show such peace and unity, Clara explains. Time helped to build trust. Family counseling, provided without cost through a local agency, helped with their anger. Their church gave them caring, and helped the children to see a different way of life. They knew it was important to help the children catch up in school, and Frank helped them get involved in an after-school tutoring program. Clara became active in a local grandparent's support group, which gave her enormous comfort. Faith helped -- not only religious faith, but faith in the desire of each family member to become healthier and happier and stronger. When faith faltered, trying anyway was almost as good.

"It's been a hard road," says Clara, "but I think we've done well. Jason and Tabika have just grown and flowered in so many ways since they've been with us. I remember when Tabika was scared of everyone, and now she's singing her heart out. I see that, and I truly feel blessed."

CHAPTER TWO:
IF YOUR GRANDCHILD WAS ABUSED, NEGLECTED, OR ABANDONED

An agency to protect children. If your grandchild was abused, neglected, or abandoned by parents, a part of your state or county government known as the child welfare agency may become involved with your family. The agency's job is to protect children from abuse and neglect, and to help their families. Sometimes the agency becomes involved because a family asks for help. Other times, someone else -- such as a neighbor or a doctor -- reports that a child is in danger.

The child welfare agency, because of its important job of keeping children safe, has powers that other agencies don't. You can tell any other agency "No thanks" if you don't want their services, but a child welfare agency can say "Sorry, we're staying involved," if they believe it's needed to keep your grandchild safe. In fact, if an agency worker finds a child in danger, there are steps the agency can take to physically remove the child from the parent or other caregiver. For example, a child welfare agency might remove your grandchild from the parent's home, and then ask you to care for the child.

This doesn't mean, of course, that an agency worker can move children from home to home at will. Agencies must follow laws and rules, and must have their actions approved by a judge. Parents and other caregivers can disagree with the agency's actions. They can tell the judge their side of the story, and have a lawyer present any other information that will help the judge decide. The court system -- not the agency or the parent -- will make the final decisions.

Your child welfare agency does offer some important services. You may want to seek help from them, or they may already be involved. The questions and answers which follow can help you decide when and if to call the agency, and how best to work with them.

Common questions about child welfare agency services

My grandchildren are living with their parents, and I'm worried about their safety. Can the child welfare agency help?

Every community has a phone number you can call if you believe a child may be being abused or neglected. You can find it in the Community Service pages of your local phone book, or just call 411 to ask telephone information. You'll be given the "child abuse hotline" of your local child welfare agency. It's okay if you're not sure of all the facts; you can just tell what you know and why you're worried. Be sure to make it clear if you are able to take care of your grandchildren while the parents get help.

When the child welfare agency gets a report of a child who may be in danger, they are required by law to try to find out the facts that very day. They will send a worker to your grandchild's home to look into the problem, and may also talk to teachers, doctors, or others who know the family. The worker will then make a decision and respond one of three ways:

- If the worker decides your grandchildren haven't been abused or neglected, a case will not be opened. It could still be a "wake up call" for the parent, though, who might then ask for help. Also, you could call again later if there were more problems.

- If the worker decides your grandchildren have been abused or neglected, but aren't in serious danger now, a case for "protective supervision" probably will be opened. The parent will be offered services such as drug treatment and parenting

classes, and a worker will visit from time to time to make sure the children are safe.

- If the worker decides your grandchildren have been abused or neglected and are in danger right now, the agency probably will physically remove the child from the parent. They will ask a court for legal custody of the children, which means that they will have the legal responsibility to see that the children are safe and cared for. They then will look for a home where the children can live as part of a family while the parent gets help. That home could be with foster parents who have been trained to help children who've been abused or neglected, but it's usually better for the children to be with relatives. That's why it's so important that you let the child welfare agency know you're available from the very first time you call.

Note that, while you would be caring for your grandchildren, the state might get legal custody of them. For more information on legal custody and what it means, see Chapter 4.

My grandchildren are already living with me, but I still feel they're in danger from a parent. Can I get help from the child welfare agency?

If you need help keeping your grandchildren safe, the child welfare agency should be able to help. You may be caring for your grandchildren informally, without ever having gone to court -- and a parent keeps taking the children home for the weekend, and bringing them back bruised and upset. Or maybe there's a long history of abuse or neglect, and the abusing parent now wants the children back.

In either of these cases, you could call the child abuse hotline, and the child welfare agency would have its usual responsibility to investigate and act. The child doesn't have to be with the abusing parent all the time for the agency to be needed.

If the agency workers find your grandchild is in danger from the parents, even though you're providing care, the agency could seek legal custody of your grandchildren. They could then -- if you were able and willing to continue to do so -- have you provide the actual care for your grandchildren. If you're not able to go on caring for your grandchildren, or if the agency workers believe it's not possible to keep the children safe with you, they could look for a foster family to provide care.

If the agency does take legal custody and has me care for my grandchildren, how will this affect our family life?

This type of care plan, often known by the name "kinship foster care", has become more common in recent years. Legally, your grandchild would be in foster care (agency legal custody), and you would be the foster parent (the person the agency has chosen to provide the actual care). But because you are family, or kin, it's called kinship foster care.

Being a kinship foster parent has pros and cons. You would receive a monthly check to help provide for your grandchildren. The amount varies by state, but will almost certainly be higher than from other programs (see Chapter 3). You might also get other benefits like free day care for your grandchildren if you are employed. The agency would also help your grandchild's parent with services. A caseworker could, for example, help a parent to get drug treatment or parenting classes.

Some grandparents find that having the agency in charge takes some of the pressure off when parents become angry.

The down side is that you loose family privacy. A caseworker would visit you from time to time (once a month is common) to make sure your grandchildren are receiving good care. A caseworker could even -- although it's unlikely -- recommend that the agency remove the child from your home and find a different foster parent.

You would also have less of a voice in making some decisions about your grandchild. One big area is the child's future. The child welfare agency must, by law, make "reasonable efforts" to reunite your grandchild with a parent. If you believe in your heart that the child should stay with you, this could be a problem for you.

Some grandparents also find that they are unhappy with the services they and their grandchildren get. In many state child welfare agencies, workers have too many cases and too little time. It can be doubly hard -- even risky -- to have workers who will be reporting to a judge about your life, but who don't have enough time to get to know you well.

I don't want the state having that much voice in our family life. Are there other options?

Yes, if your grandchildren aren't in immediate danger. You could:

- Seek legal custody of your grandchildren (see Chapter 4);
- Seek financial help from government programs that don't require the state to take legal custody of your grandchildren (see

Chapter 3); and

- Look for services like counseling (for the children) or drug treatment (for the parents) from other community service agencies, which also don't require the state to take legal custody of the children (see Chapters 1 and 5).

But if your grandchildren are in danger right now, and their parent won't agree to let you care for them, you probably will have to call the child abuse hotline. It's your best bet for getting action *today* to get and keep your grandchildren safe. True, it's a serious step -- but your grandchildren are in a serious situation and need protection.

If the child welfare agency wants me to care for my grandchildren, can't they just ask the court to give me legal custody?

Yes, they can, in some cases. The child welfare agency will almost certainly agree, and join you in asking the court to give you legal custody of your grandchildren, if:

- You want legal custody;
- The parents agree you should have it; AND
- The agency believes your grandchildren will be safe with you.

Before you rush to ask for custody, though, be sure you know the costs. You'll lose the foster care payment, and may lose any other benefits the agency provides to foster parents. You also won't have complete privacy, as the agency will probably want to keep "protective

supervision", at least for awhile. This might mean that a worker would still visit your home, but you would have a greater voice in making decisions about your grandchildren.

Before you decide which route you'd like to go, ask lots of questions about exactly what you can expect. Be sure to ask what services and benefits will be available if you have custody and the agency stays involved. Also be sure to read Chapter 4 of this booklet to help you make decisions about what form of custody you might want.

How long will the agency stay involved?

If you get legal custody of your grandchildren and the parent agrees, probably not long. Once the agency is satisfied that the children are safe, they're likely to close their case.

Even if the agency gets legal custody of your grandchildren, it still will be only temporary. Foster care (including kinship foster care) is meant to keep children safe and with a caring family while parents work on getting better. It's not meant to be permanent.

From the day your grandchild enters foster care status, the agency must by law work toward ending that status and moving to a permanent plan. First the child welfare agency must make reasonable efforts to reunite your grandchildren with a parent. This is often a slow process. Troubled parents can be hard to help, especially if workers are overloaded. And if the children are doing well with you, both you and the worker may not want to rock the boat. So, while federal law requires a court review whenever a child stays in foster care eighteen months, many children actually stay for years.

What if my grandchildren can't go home to a parent?

If it becomes clear that your grandchildren can't reasonably return to their parents -- for example, if the parents are refusing to get help, have dropped out of sight, or decide they want the child to stay with you -- the agency will almost certainly ask if you will care for your grandchildren permanently. At that point, they'll want to help you get some form of custody, and soon after that close the case.

Once the child welfare agency gives up legal custody, the foster care payments will end. You do have other options, though, and it's wise to plan ahead. If you adopt a grandchild, you may qualify for a special needs adoption subsidy from the child welfare agency up to the amount of the past foster care payment. In a few states, you could get a similar subsidy if you became your grandchild's permanent guardian. Other options are the programs described in Chapter 3 of this book. Be sure to talk about all these options with the agency worker, and also with a lawyer -- one who does NOT work for the child welfare agency. That way, you're more certain to get the help your grandchildren need and deserve.

I've heard that people can go to jail for child abuse. If I report my daughter [or my son], will she [or he] be arrested?

The child welfare agency's job is to protect children. Its work is done under laws called "civil" child abuse laws, which offer ways to protect children without arresting parents. The child welfare agency is not a law enforcement agency, and it has no power to arrest anybody. In most cases, families receive services, and police are not contacted.

There are also, in every state, criminal laws which protect the public. These include criminal child abuse laws, crimes against children, and general crimes such as assault or rape. If the abuse against your grandchild was very serious, the child welfare agency could contact your local police or district attorney's office and tell them the facts. In that case, the police could arrest the person believed to have committed a crime.

Different states have different policies, but usually the police are only contacted if the abuse was very serious, or if the child welfare agency workers believe it's the only sure way to keep the child safe. In a few states, the child welfare agency routinely reports to the police in all cases, but the police generally will only act if the abuse was severe.

What if I call the child welfare agency and they say they can't help? Is that the end of it?

In many states, the child welfare agency is slow to help grandparents raising grandchildren, even when the family has a legal right to that help. This is probably because there are so many children who are in danger and *don't* have grandparents to help them. If it seems like there's not enough staff time and money to help everyone, someone in the agency may decide the children with grandparents need help less.

The problem with this is that it's not fair and can hurt children. The laws are there to protect all children, including your grandchildren. If there's not enough staff to help everyone, the agency may need more staff. We don't let half our roads or public buildings fall apart because money is tight. And children are much more important than buildings.

If you think the agency isn't doing what it should be, you might just be right. It's worth it to talk with others at your grandparents support group, and to check with a lawyer experienced in working with the child welfare agency. You may even be able to find a legal service office or a volunteer lawyer to help you for free (see Chapter 4).

I'm still nervous. Is there anyplace I can find people who know what I'm going through, but who also have experience in dealing with child welfare agencies?

Foster parent associations can be a real help and support to grandparents raising grandchildren. Many state or local foster parent groups meet regularly, offering support and information much as grandparent support groups do. If you go, you'll meet people who've spent years raising children with backgrounds and needs much like your grandchildren. They are also likely to have lots of insight -- and possibly some clout -- in working with the child welfare agency. Finally, if you decide to become active in working to improve the system nationwide, the National Foster Parent Association can be a good way to use your energies. To locate your local and state group, or to learn about becoming active at all levels, call the National Foster Parent Association at (815) 455-2527.

CHAPTER THREE: GETTING HELP WITH EXPENSES

Finding help with expenses and practical needs. Raising children is expensive. No matter how much you love your grandchildren, you have to be practical. Before your grandchildren came to live with you, you probably had a budget which met your needs (or, at least, almost did). Now it may be strained to the breaking point. This chapter looks at government programs which may help you to provide for your grandchildren, including:

- **Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).** This program provides eligible families with a modest monthly check. In some states, it may also help with daycare and/or emergency needs.

- **Medicaid.** This a type of government sponsored medical insurance which pays for the medical care of eligible children.

- **Food Stamps.** This program helps low-income families buy food.

- **The Earned Income Tax Credit (EIC).** This tax credit can provide a yearly payment by check to eligible families with an adult wage earner, children in the household, and low income.

- **Supplemental Security Income (SSI).** This program provides cash assistance for children and adults with disabilities.

- **Special Needs Adoption Subsidies.** These subsidies, designed to encourage adoptions, provide continuing cash assistance.

The information here is as of September 1995, and could change. For current rules, ask at the office of the program you're interested in.

Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). AFDC is the government program for providing monthly payments by check to help children in need. In addition to the money benefit, AFDC recipients also automatically get the health care coverage of Medicaid. Some states also will make extra payments in emergencies.

You don't have to be low income for your grandchildren to receive AFDC. Because you are not the parent, you can ask for benefits for your grandchildren alone, and your income won't be considered. (If your grandchildren have income, it will be counted.) The check amount would only cover your grandchildren, and only they would get Medicaid.

In most communities, there is a single office where you can apply for AFDC, Medicaid, and/or Food Stamps. It may be called the Office of Public Assistance, the Department of Social Services, or by some other name. Look in your phone book county or city government pages, or call telephone information and ask.

If you are low income, you may be able to be included in the AFDC benefits as the children's caregiver. Probably the most important result would be that then you'd get Medicaid coverage, too. Depending on your state, it might also mean a slightly bigger monthly check.

Since the AFDC program is only available to relatives (including grandparents) caring for children, you'll have to show that you are the grandparents. Use whatever documents help show this, such as birth certificates, marriage licenses, and family bibles. If you're a paternal grandparent, bring any writing in which your son admits he's the father.

Medicaid. The Medicaid program pays medical bills for persons who qualify -- and most grandchildren being raised by grandparents do. Your grandchildren could get Medicaid if:

- Your grandchildren receive AFDC, SSI, or a Special Needs Adoption Subsidy;
- Your grandchildren are eligible to receive AFDC, but you apply only for Medicaid for them; or
- Your grandchildren have a little too much income to qualify for AFDC, but they have lots of medical bills, and your state has a special rule that allows them to qualify as "medically needy".

You also could get Medicaid with your grandchildren if you qualify for AFDC with them -- or have the right combination of modest income, high medical bills, and a state rule for the "medically needy."

You may feel uncomfortable asking for help from the government. Just remember, you're making the extra effort to care for your grandchildren, and these programs are there to help you help them.

Each person in your family who qualifies for Medicaid gets a Medicaid card. When you get health care, the card is presented to the clinic, doctor or hospital, which then bills the state. Since some health care providers won't accept Medicaid, it's smart to check first before going to a new doctor or clinic. Also check to see what services are covered, since some states won't cover dental care, eyeglasses, and some mental health services. To apply for Medicaid, ask at the office where people apply for AFDC.

Food Stamps. The Food Stamp program helps low income households to buy food. To qualify, your household as a whole -- not just your grandchildren -- must be low income. If you do qualify, you'll get coupons, or "stamps", to buy food for the entire family. The amount of food stamps you get depends on how many people live in your house or apartment, how much income total you have, and what your other expenses are. You can then use the stamps at most any grocery store, just the same way you'd use cash. Food stamps can't be used for restaurant food or for non-food items like diapers or cleaning supplies.

The food stamp program has lots of detailed rules about what income is counted and what expenses can be deducted. When you apply, try to work with the worker to make sure you get any deductions you're allowed to have.

You do *not* need to have legal custody of your grandchildren to get AFDC, Medicaid, Food Stamps or SSI. You *may* have to prove the children live with you.

For example, suppose your sister also lives with you. She's employed, and she buys and prepares her own food. Her earnings and yours together might put you over the income limit -- unless you take advantage of a special rule that says an adult who buys and prepares food separately needn't be counted in your household. The worker should know that rule, but needs information from you to apply it. You can help by carefully explaining any situation you think affects your ability to afford food. Then insist that you get all the deductions the rules allow.

The state, the parents, and you

There are risks when you apply for AFDC and/or Medicaid for your grandchildren. Some grandparents find, for example, that a parent has been getting an AFDC check, falsely claiming to be caring for a child. When the grandparents apply and prove the child lives with them, the parent's check stops. If a lot of money's involved, the state could even prosecute a parent for fraud. Parents may become angry at the grandparents, and may try to take the child back.

Child support is another sensitive issue. When AFDC or Medicaid benefits are paid to you, it creates a debt which the parents can be legally forced to pay. To get these benefits, you have to give information to help the state find the parents, show who the father is, and collect child support from either or both parents. (There is what's called a "good cause" exception if there's a "threat of harm" to you or the children, but it's applied very narrowly.) Child support collection can be helpful, especially since there are rules that make the state (in most cases) share some of what's collected with you. But it also can mean legal troubles for a parent -- maybe even years later, after the parent and children are back together.

If these issues worry you, you may want to discuss them with a lawyer and also at your grandparent's support group. There's no right answer, but it's best to be prepared and think ahead.

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EIC). If you are employed but do not have high earnings, federal income tax time could become a happy one for you. Instead of you having to pay taxes, Uncle Sam may owe *you* money.

Here's how the EIC works. The EIC is a benefit for families where there are modest earnings and children in the family. To be eligible, you must have earnings from income, but no more than the limit set for the program each year. (Families raising one child in 1996 can earn up to $25,119. Families raising two or more children can earn up to $28,553.) You must then file a federal income tax return -- even if you otherwise wouldn't have to -- and fill out a special form for claiming the EIC. Your benefit, which is based on a percentage of your earnings, could be up to $3,156 for one child, or $3,564 for two or more children. If you owe taxes, the EIC will be deducted from what you owe. If you don't owe taxes, or owe less than your EIC benefit, a check will be sent to you. That's it -- no office to go to, no waiting in line!

For more information

- The AARP Grandparent Information Center (202-434-2296) will mail you an EIC Tax Package, with information and forms.
- The AARP Tax Aide program (202-434-6000), operating from February 1 to April 15, can assist you with questions.
- The federal Internal Revenue Service (IRS) (1-800-829-1040) can also supply free information, forms, and assistance.

Supplemental Security Income (SSI). All of the programs described so far may apply to any grandchild, whether or not the child has special needs. Those basic programs may be helpful, but if you have a grandchild with severe special needs, they may not be enough. You may have lots of extra expenses due to your grandchild's disability, such as increased cost for childcare, time you lose from work, therapy programs not covered by Medicaid, and transportation to needed services.

> If your grandchild has severe special needs, he or she may have a right to receive SSI.

You may want to look into Supplemental Security Income (SSI) for any grandchild with severe special needs. The SSI program provides a monthly check to assist low income blind or disabled children and adults. SSI can pay up to $446 on behalf of a disabled child or adult. Although not a large sum, that's more in most states than an entire family would receive from AFDC. If you are raising more than one grandchild, you may be able to get SSI for any grandchild who is disabled, and AFDC for any child who is not.

> Save time when applying for any type of benefits by calling first and getting a list of all the information and papers you'll need. Ask how long you may have to wait, so you can schedule your time.

People eligible for SSI (like those eligible for AFDC) also get Medicaid coverage. You may, however, have to complete a separate application for the Medicaid.

Qualifying for SSI. There are detailed rules about who qualifies for SSI. The general rule is that, to qualify, a child must have a physical or mental disability which is "severe", so that the child cannot do the everyday things that other children the same age do. Both medical and other evidence (such as reports from teachers and therapists) are considered.

If you apply for SSI for your grandchild, you'll need to collect medical records, school records, and anything else that will help show the seriousness of your grandchild's disabilities.

The Social Security Administration, which runs the SSI program, has a list of many physical and mental health problems, with descriptions for different age children of what would be severe enough to qualify. If your grandchild has a disability (or combination of disabilities) not on the list, you would have to show, in order for the child to qualify:

- That the condition is as severe as a listed condition; AND
- That the condition keeps the child from being able to do the things that other children the same age can do.

Your grandchild must also be low income, but your income is not counted. There is a rule, though, that could mean a lower SSI check because you help pay your grandchild's bills. To avoid this, insist on what's called a "fair share calculation", showing that the SSI check will be used to pay for your grandchild's "fair share" of family expenses.

You can apply for SSI at your local Social Security Administration office. To find it, you can call 1-800-772-1213.

Special Needs Adoption Subsidy. The special needs adoption subsidy program is designed to encourage the adoption of children who might otherwise spend years in foster care. Through adoption subsidies, states allow certain children to be adopted, while keeping the level of financial support -- plus Medicaid coverage -- that the children would have gotten if in foster care.

- Adoption subsidies can provide up to the amount of your state's foster care payment, which typically is much higher than AFDC.

- Unlike being a kinship foster parent, your state child welfare agency won't need to stay involved with your family.

- Many children who are not disabled and do not qualify for SSI can qualify for special needs adoption subsidies.

An adoption subsidy will only be possible if you adopt your grandchild. (See Chapter 4.) Your grandchild must either have been in foster care, be eligible for SSI, or have been eligible for AFDC before living with you. The child also must have been removed from his or her parent by court order (although the court order could be after the parent agreed). Finally, your grandchild must meet your state's definition of "special need". In many states, though, "special need" is defined very broadly. For example, it could include sibling groups, simply because it's harder to find people who can adopt two or more children at once.

The rules and process for getting an adoption subsidy are quite detailed and sometimes confusing, especially if your grandchild is not now in foster care status. To be sure you're not unfairly disqualified, you'll need to get help applying from your lawyer. (See Chapter 4.)

Choosing between benefits

AFDC, SSI and special needs adoption subsidies are all meant to support a child, and you can't get more then one of them for the same child at the same time. These tips may help if you have to make a choice:

- In most states, AFDC offers by far the least money, while adoption subsidy typically can offer the most. If you have more than one grandchild eligible, the difference is even greater. SSI or adoption subsidy give separate full benefits for each child, while an AFDC check only gets a little bigger for a bigger family.

- Any of the three programs will give your grandchild coverage from Medicaid for health care costs. But here's the difference: only AFDC policies will allow you to be included in your grandchildren's AFDC grant -- and covered by Medicaid -- if you are low income and meet other program requirements.

- It is possible for one or more family members to receive SSI or an adoption subsidy, while others receive AFDC. That allows some families to keep full Medicaid coverage, but increase their cash benefits.

A benefit package. Many grandparent headed families need more financial help than any one program can offer. If you are having real trouble making ends meet, you may want to seek a package of benefits. Here are some examples of what some families receive:

- Bernice, who is widowed, was employed until her two grandchildren came to live with her. The youngest grandchild is seriously ill with AIDS, and Bernice left her job -- and lost her only income -- to care for him. She receives SSI (with Medicaid coverage) for that child, and receives AFDC (with Medicaid) for the other grandchild and herself as caregiver. The family also gets food stamps.

- June and Roger are raising three of their grandchildren. Roger earns about $13,000 per year as a security guard, and June earns about $5,000 per year caring for neighborhood children after school. They get an Earned Income Tax Credit, and also receive AFDC (with Medicaid) for the children only.

The different programs, each with its own rules and forms, can be confusing. Sometimes it may seem like a job in itself just applying for all your grandchildren need and deserve. You may want to ask others at your grandparent support group for help with forms or tips about applying. You may also want to ask a lawyer -- especially, if you are low-income, a Legal Services lawyer -- for advice about which programs to apply to. Keep in mind that patience and sticking with it can pay off.

CHAPTER FOUR:
GETTING HELP
FROM THE LEGAL SYSTEM

Why do you need a lawyer? As you care for your grandchildren, you probably have your hands full. You're doing your best to care for the children each day. Lawyers -- and, in fact, the whole legal system -- may be the last thing you want to think about. You also have to be concerned about expenses. You may be thinking, "Okay, if I must go to court, I'll do it on my own."

These concerns are reasonable, but the truth is you will almost certainly have to use the legal system, and the services of a lawyer, if your grandchildren continue to live with you. You'll have to take some steps to keep your grandchildren safe and secure. You'll probably need legal papers just to get them medical care or enroll them in school. You may also need legal help to plan for their future or to keep them safe from harm. There will be decisions you must make which are too serious to be made without sound legal advice.

Making the law work for you. This chapter explains the legal process and what it can and cannot do for you. It shows how decisions you make may affect your grandchildren and your family. There are tips on finding the right lawyer -- including if you can't pay for one.

Only you can decide what you believe is right for your family. Not your lawyer, not your neighbor, not your best friend. Start by looking at your grandchild's needs and thinking about how best to meet them. Then think about what will work in your family. Be honest about what you do well and what will be hard for you. Try to think not just about today, but also later when the children -- and you -- are older. Remember that the law is a tool, and a lawyer someone who can help you to use that tool. With effort, you can make the law work for you.

Finding a lawyer. The decisions you make about legal issues are important. A lawyer can help you to understand what each choice may mean for your family, and whether there are any risks. A lawyer also helps to work out agreements with the parents and present facts to the judge. If your grandchildren need cash benefits or medical coverage from the government, a lawyer may help with this, too.

You'll want to find a lawyer who knows the law, but also who will work well with you. Look for one who listens and shows respect, and who can argue effectively for your grandchildren's rights.

Look for a lawyer with experience in abuse and neglect law, guardianship, *and* adoption. Ask, too, if the lawyer knows about any program (like SSI or adoption subsidies) that may be an option for your family.

If you're active in a grandparent's support group, ask if people there know of any good lawyers. There may even be a lawyer who works with group members, perhaps for a reduced fee. If no one can recommend a lawyer, you could call the family law section of your city or county bar association. The local court where child welfare cases are decided may also have a list of lawyers trained in child welfare law. As a last resort, look in the phone book Yellow Pages.

Call the offices of a few lawyers to ask about experience and fees. When you find someone who seems right, make an appointment. Come to that first meeting with a list of all the main facts about what's happened. Then tell the lawyer all the facts, even -- especially -- those that could hurt your case. Agree to hire the lawyer if and only if you feel comfortable and can work as a team.

If you can't afford to pay

You still may be able to get good legal help even if you can't afford to pay. Try:

Legal Services. Also known as Legal Aid, these government sponsored law offices help low income persons with common legal problems. The lawyers tend to be young and overworked, but may know a lot about your kind of case. Look in the government pages of your phone book.

Law school clinics. If there's a law school near you, see if they have a clinic which represents grandparents in child welfare or custody cases. A law student will work with you, supervised by an experienced lawyer. To find out what programs exist, call the law school Dean's office.

A *pro bono* lawyer. Sometimes private lawyers will work for free if a case will help more than just one family. If you are trying to change an unfair law or challenge an unfair state policy, you might find an interested lawyer. Call the bar association and ask for ideas on finding one.

Lawyers have an ethical duty to do their best in every case, whether or not the client is paying. If you feel you're not getting good service, talk to your lawyer -- or your lawyer's supervisor -- about the problem.

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Why do you need a piece of paper from a judge anyway?

Isn't it enough just to be the grandparent? Going to a judge may seem like a lot of fuss for no good reason. Yet that "paper from a judge," which gives you legal custody of your grandchildren, tells the world that you're in charge. This can be important. For example:

- It may be needed for you to sign for regular health care for your grandchildren, such as vaccinations.
- Your local school may ask to see it before you can enroll your grandchildren.
- If you need cash benefits (like Aid to Families with Dependent Children) for your grandchildren, legal custody papers are a quick way to show that the children really live with you full-time.

Protecting your grandchildren. Having legal custody can also help you to keep your grandchildren safe. Suppose that a grandchild's parent came to your house, drunk or high on drugs, and wanted to take the child for a ride. Without legal custody, you wouldn't have the right just to say "no". You could try calling the police or your local child abuse hotline, but you couldn't refuse on your own. That's because, without legal custody, you're not legally in charge -- the parents are.

Many children also worry about where they'll be tomorrow. "Mom couldn't keep me," your grandchild may be thinking. "Will Grandma send me away, too?" Making your role formal with legal custody -- and explaining your role to your grandchildren -- may help. You know you care enough to be there. Legal custody tells the world.

What exactly is legal custody? The person (or married couple) with legal custody of a child has the day-to-day responsibility to care for the child. Legal custodians must see, for example, that the child:

- Has food, clothing and shelter
- Gets needed medical care
- Goes to school (if school age)
- Is not abused or neglected

A person with legal custody also has rights which are needed to meet these responsibilities. For example, he or she can:

- Apply for benefits (like medical insurance payments) for the child
- Consent to (sign for) medical care for the child
- Enroll the child in school, and see school records
- Make decisions about how to care for the child

When a child is born, the mother automatically has legal custody -- and so does the father, if they are married. A grandparent, however, must go to a court to get legal custody of a grandchild. A custody order, guardianship, or adoption are all ways to get legal custody.

You may notice that the word "custody" is used in more than one way. *Legal custody* means all the ways a person could have legal custody of a child. A *custody order* is just one of those ways. (It's like the word "housing", which can mean houses, condos, or apartments.) People also sometimes talk about who has "physical custody", which just means the person the child lives with.

Types of legal custody

In most states, there are three possible ways you could gain legal custody of your grandchild:

You could get a custody order. This means that you would be responsible for the child's care day-to-day. The parents would continue to have a legal relationship with the child. They would have a right to visit (unless the judge says they can't), and could someday ask a judge to give custody back to them.

You could become the child's legal guardian. Like a custody order, becoming a legal guardian means day-to-day responsibility for the child, while the parents keep some rights. The main difference is that guardianship is usually granted in a different court, with different rules.

You could adopt the child. You would become the child's legal parent in every way. The legal relationship between the child and the child's parents of birth would end, and you could decide if and when they could visit. The birth parents would never again have the right to ask a judge to send the children back to them.

Custody orders. In many states, the simplest way to get legal custody is a custody order. A custody order for your grandchildren would give you basic rights needed to care for them, such as the right to consent to medical treatment, or the right to enroll them in school. You would not have to show the parents are unfit, or ask them to give up their basic rights as parents. You *could* ask for limits on the parents' visits.

If you get guardianship or custody, ask your lawyer to be sure it's in the court record why the parents couldn't care for your grandchild. This could help later if a parent wants the child back, but you feel the child should stay with you.

Many families like custody orders because they are not too hard to get, and they allow parents a legal role. If there's a parent who can pay child support and/or visit regularly, that can help. A custody order also may be a good choice if you're hoping the parents will get better.

For other families, custody orders leave the door open a little too wide. A parent -- either your adult child or your grandchild's other parent -- could later go back to court to ask that a custody order be changed. While exact rules are different in each state, she or he would probably have to show the judge that the change would be "in the best interest of the child". The parent might also have to show that things are different now (in legal terms, a "change of circumstance").

If you're worried that a parent might later want your grandchildren back, and that it might not be good for the children, talk to your lawyer about it. Find out how easy or how hard it would be for a parent in your state to get back custody, and think about that as you decide.

Guardianship. Another common way to get legal custody is by becoming the child's legal guardian. Like a custody order, guardianship doesn't mean ending the legal rights of the parent. A parent could have the right to visit, and could come back later and ask a judge to return the child to the parent.

The main difference between custody orders and guardianship involves court rules. In most states, custody orders are made in the court where divorces are granted. Guardianship is granted in the court where people go with wills after someone has died. Each court has it's own rules and it's own standards.

> **In some states, legal guardians must return to court each year to report on their care of the child and/or on their finances. Ask your lawyer if this rule applies in your state.**

If you're trying to decide between seeking guardianship or a custody order, talk with your lawyer about:

- Whether one type would cost more, take longer, or require more return trips to court
- Whether your choice would affect cash benefits or health insurance coverage for your grandchild
- Whether your choice would affect the parent's ability to visit or to ask for custody back

The answers to these questions differ by state and even by county. Knowing them can help you decide which choice is right for you.

Rebuilding a Family

Janie Summers has devoted her life to children. She and her late husband raised four together, and she also worked most of those years as a teacher's aide. So she was ready and able to step in when her granddaughter, Yolanda, began using crack cocaine and neglecting her two little boys.

When it came to choosing a type of custody to seek, Janie knew adoption wasn't right for their family. "Number one," says Janie, "Yolanda's too young. I'm not ready to write her off. Number two, I'm too old. I can care for these boys now, but how about when they're in their teens and I'm in my seventies? I'm hoping that by then, Yolanda will have gotten off the drugs and maybe even gotten married. Or maybe their father will take them then. He's a nice enough boy; he's just young and wild now, too."

That left guardianship or a custody order to choose from. Janie, whose low retirement income qualifies her for Legal Aid, talked to her lawyer there. In her state, she learned, either guardianship or a custody order would allow later changes. But the Probate Court, which grants guardianship, would require lots more paperwork and return trips to court. So Janie got the custody order. Since everyone agreed, it took just one trip to court.

Adoption. It may seem strange to think about adopting your own grandchild, but for some families it's the best choice. Adoption is the only way you can be sure that your relationship with your grandchild is legally permanent. If you adopt your grandchild, you will have all the legal rights of a parent.

Does that mean that your grandchildren can never see their parents of birth again? Of course not. It simply means that the decision is entirely yours to make. In some families, the grandparents adopt, but the birth parents stay involved. In other families, the grandparents feel that one or both of the parents is dangerous to the child, and they don't allow any visits at all.

Adoption means no more right to child support payments from the parents of birth. But if there was a court order removing the child from parental care, he or she may qualify for cash payments and/ or medical coverage under a Special Needs Adoption Subsidy. Talk to your lawyer (and read Chapter 3).

Adoption is a serious step, and is not right for all families. Anger at your son or daughter is not a good reason to choose adoption. It could only add to the family fight, causing more hurt to your grandchild. The *only* good reason to choose adoption is if you truly believe it will help your grandchild to be and to feel more safe and secure.

If the parents don't agree, adoption can be hard to do. In most states, you would have to prove the parents are "unfit" to care for the child. Talk with your lawyer about what to expect, and think carefully about the stress on family life. Still, keep in mind that you are planning for a lifetime. If adoption is what your grandchild needs, the stress will pass.

A Tough Choice

For Bob and Cecilia Parker, the decision to adopt their grandson Danny was one of the hardest they ever made. "We kept hoping that our daughter, Ellen, would straighten out her life," says Cecilia. "But we watched Danny, always on an emotional roller coaster. Would he go back to mommy? Would he have to leave us? At age seven, he was so clingy, afraid he'd lose us."

Bob and Cecilia tried guardianship first, but it didn't feel secure enough. Whenever they disagreed with Ellen over anything, she'd threaten to go to court for custody. It felt like a sword hanging over their heads. Painful as it was, they decided to push for adoption. With help from their lawyer, they were able to come to an agreement. They wouldn't go to court to prove Ellen unfit, and they would agree in writing to allow visits, if she would give up her rights as a parent and let them adopt. Danny's father, who'd never been involved, didn't come to court to contest.

The adoption was stressful, but it let the family get a fresh start. Bob explains: "Danny still calls us Grandma and Grandpa, and I know Ellen will always be important to him. But now that Danny knows he'll always be with us, he's so much more secure. It's really helped us all.""

Reaching agreements. Does getting a court order make you think of loud, nasty, courtroom battles? That's a common fear, but usually doesn't happen. In most cases, the grandparents and the parents find a way to agree instead. That probably will happen in your family, too, even if it seems now like you'll never agree. The reason is that few people -- including troubled parents -- really *want* to go to court. Once people calm down and talk to a lawyer, they realize they could lose big in court. If they're caring, they also realize that court fights hurt children. It's better to work out a plan that will provide for the children in a loving way. Two ways to do this include:

- **Negotiation.** Your lawyer can talk to the lawyers who work for each of the parents, or you can all sit down together with the lawyers to work out a plan.

- **Mediation.** After you talk with your lawyer, you and the parents can sit down together, without your lawyers -- but with a person trained to help people work out agreements.

Either route can work, if it feels right for you. If you're interested in mediation, ask your lawyer if there are free services through your local court. Talk to your lawyer *before you mediate* and *before you sign anything*. This will help you to make a safe and secure agreement.

If a parent is missing. You may be worried that, because one of the parents is missing, this will hold up an agreement or court order. In most cases, there's no problem. Ask your lawyer early about rules in your state for notice to a missing parent, and the delay, if any, should be brief.

Don't forget about child support!

When parents can't raise their children, they still have a duty to pay child support. Judges can make parents pay, whether they want to or not. Child support can help pay the bills, but it means more than that. For the child, it's a sign that Mom and Dad care enough to help. For the parents, it's a way to stay involved. Parents who pay support also tend to visit more. Both parents or just one can pay child support.

Ask your lawyer about including child support in any custody agreement you make (except for adoption, since adoption ends the support duty). Your state will have child support guidelines which can help you agree on a fair amount. If a parent can't afford to pay much, you can set just a small amount, like $50 a month.

If the parents weren't married when your grandchild was born, there will need to be a legal paper first to show who is the father. This is called "establishing paternity". If the mother isn't sure who is the father (or the father doesn't believe it), there are blood tests that can help. Talk to your lawyer about what to expect, and whether there are any risks. Also try your state child support enforcement office, listed in your phone book county government pages. They may be able to help you for little or no cost.

If you're worried about safety. Most parents, even neglectful ones, aren't dangerous. But some are. If you're worried about your grandchildren's safety -- or your own -- there are laws that can help. Once you have any form of legal custody, you may be able to get:

- **A protection order.** Most states have laws which allow a judge to order a parent or other person to stay away from you, your grandchildren, and your home. If the person ignores the order and bothers you, the police can arrest him or her on the spot.

- **Supervised visitation.** If a parent wants to visit, but a visit could be dangerous, the judge may order "supervised visitation". This means that the visit may take place only in a safe setting, with someone watching. For example, a person who works for the court, or for a community clinic, might go along on any visit.

If you get a protection order or an order for supervised visitation, it's important to call the police *every* time it's disobeyed. It's tempting to let things slide until there's a big problem, but this is a mistake. Everyone involved -- the person who's supposed to stay away, the police, and even the judge -- will take the order less seriously if you don't show you're serious. If you decide that you don't need the order any more, or you need less strict terms, you should go back and ask the judge to change it. Then follow any new order just as carefully.

Don't feel guilty about insisting on safety. The parents can still see their children -- as long as they follow the rules and keep the children safe. That's good for your grandchildren, and good for the whole family.

Isn't there an easier way?

Some grandparents raising grandchildren don't need any of the things that court orders can give (like rules about visiting, child support, or protection if the parents want the child back). All they want are the rights to enroll the child in school and to consent to medical care. In New York, California, and a few other states, there is an easier, quicker way to get those rights. Special laws (often known as "consent laws") let parents give these rights to the person who will care for the children, without going to court.

The method is simple, but varies by state. Usually a parent must sign a paper giving the rights. In some states, one or more people must sign as a witness. In other states, a person known as a "notary public" must see the parent sign. In California, there's even a method if neither parent can be found.

If your state has a consent law, someone at your grandparent support group, your grandchildren's school, or your doctor's office will probably know about it and have forms you can use. Just remember that consent forms give you NO protection if you and the parents ever disagree. If you are at all worried about visiting, safety, child support, or the parents wanting the child back, talk to a lawyer first.

If you must go to court. Sometimes families just can't agree, and a judge must decide. If you really believe that something is needed for your grandchildren's security and the parents won't agree, you may have to go to court. No one likes going to court, but it's not the end of the world. You can make the best of it if you:

- **Talk to your lawyer first.** Ask what's likely to happen so you'll have fewer surprises.

- **Come prepared.** Practice explaining your concerns to your lawyer or a friend. Bring along some brief notes with dates and main points if you think it will help.

- **Be fair.** You don't need to praise the parents, but don't be afraid to say something good if it's true. The judge will take your concerns more seriously if it's clear you're not speaking in anger or trying to exaggerate.

It's hard for judges to make the best decision based only on what people say in the courtroom. For this reason, the judge may ask someone to visit and talk with you in your home, and also to meet with the parents. Of course, you'll feel nervous -- everyone does. But there's no need to worry too much. If you care enough to go to court, it's because you know your grandchildren need the stability and care you can give them. Speak frankly and fairly, and your caring will show.

The judge, after gathering enough information, will make a decision. Your lawyer should make sure that all important points -- such as visitation, child support, and safety -- are covered in the court order.

Grandparents talk about the legal process

"It wasn't as bad as I thought. My lawyer helped, and so did my friends."

"We went to court twice -- once just for the judge to approve our agreement, and once when we had a problem with visits."

"Don't be afraid to ask lots of questions. Your lawyer works for you, not the other way around."

"I didn't like having to air our private family business in front of a stranger, but the judge seemed nice. In the end it was worth it."

"My grandparent support group was a big help. I liked being able to talk things over with people who'd been through the same thing."

"I never thought my daughter would agree to anything. But the day before we were supposed to go to court, her lawyer called ours and said she was agreeing to everything."

"I'm just glad it's over. Now we can go on with being a family."

CHAPTER FIVE: MEETING YOUR GRANDCHILD'S NEEDS

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Understanding your grandchild's needs. Even if your grandchildren are happy to be with you, they have been through a lot. Losing a parent is hard on a child, and so are too many changes.

It's also likely that the same problems which keep the parents from caring for their children now also affected how well they could care for them before. One or both parents may abuse drugs or alcohol, be violent, or be mentally unstable. Because of these problems, your grandchildren may have been hurt physically and emotionally. They may have been left without enough food, or without the care they needed to stay safe and to grow. They may have been allowed to see sexual activity, or even have been sexually abused. If the mother drank alcohol or took drugs while pregnant, her child may have been affected before birth. All these problems may have affected your grandchildren, who may need special help to grow and thrive.

Watching a child you love struggle with the pain of past hurts may be one of life's hardest tasks. But it's also an opportunity to help.

This chapter is written to help you give your grandchildren that extra help. It describes services and benefits your grandchildren may have a right to receive. It tells about some common problems you may face, and how some other grandparents have coped.

The ideas and resources described here can help any grandchild, because any child separated from parents has had a loss. Some of the ideas may be especially needed if your grandchildren have been abused or neglected and/or have emotional or behavioral problems.

How past hurts affect children and families. Because your grandchildren have lost so much -- and especially if they were abused or neglected -- they'll need help dealing with the hurt. They may have nightmares or wet the bed. They may act up, have trouble learning, or have health problems. They may be fearful or angry. Children who go through painful times live with the effects long after -- even after they're in a safe and nurturing place.

Have you ever dropped a stone into a lake, and watched the ripples spread wider and wider? The effects of childhood trauma can spread, too. Suppose, for example, you have a ten-year-old grandchild who still wets the bed. That affects you -- especially on laundry day. Sometimes the effects are hard to see, but still very real. For example, your grandchild may seem to argue all the time, and soon you catch yourself snapping back. In a short time, your family life can change from peaceful to stressful. In part, that's just life with children. But if there's lots of stress, a big part of the reason may be past hurts.

It's natural for a child to feel angry about being abused, neglected, or abandoned. But acting angry toward the parent may feel too scary. Instead, your grandchildren may direct their anger at you.

Raising children who've had a troubled relationship with parents can be very hard. You feel sad they've been hurt, and want to help them and show your love. But the child, remem bering past hurts, may push you away. All the anger and fear that was too scary to show before may come spilling out now. It may take all the love you have -- plus some good help -- to get past the hard times.

Working out the pain

The day their grandson came to live with them, Irma and Don James took him out for pizza to celebrate. "We'd been so worried for so long," says Irma. "When our daughter finally agreed we could raise Jamie, we felt like a nightmare was over."

But there were more hard times to come. Seven-year-old Jamie had tantrums so bad he would smash things and beat his head against the wall. In school, he talked back to teachers and hit other children. Worst of all, he strangled a neighbor's kitten to death.

Irma and Don realized that Jamie needed help. They took him to a local health center with mental health services, where he could get counseling. Because their health insurance plan didn't cover Jamie, they learned about getting him Medicaid, the government paid medical coverage. They also learned about the school process for matching children who have problems in school with services that can help. Soon Jamie was in a much smaller class for children with behavior problems, where he learned more and fought less.

"Jamie's problems aren't going to go away overnight," says Irma. "But at least now he's getting the help he needs. And that helps us all."

Six ways to help your grandchildren feel and act better

1. Every child needs attention. Maybe your grandchildren, when living with their parents, could only get attention by misbehaving. *By giving attention to positive behavior, you can show them there's another way.*

2. Misbehaving may be a cry for help. Children who've been hurt need structure and rules, applied with love, to help them get back on track. *As you give them the love and structure they need, they may begin to act out less.*

3. Your grandchildren may be expressing the anger they feel at all they've been through. It's a way of saying, "I deserve better." The anger is healthy, but it's coming out the wrong way. *You can help them learn to express their anger in a safer, more positive way.*

4. There may be physical reasons. For example, if a mother takes drugs or drinks alcohol while pregnant, the baby may be affected. The effects -- which include behavior -- may last into adulthood. *Good medical care won't make the problems disappear, but it can help.*

5. Misbehaving in school can be related to learning problems. No child wants to look or feel "stupid", so some act tough or play the class clown. *You can work with the schools to help your grandchildren do their best -- and praise the children for their efforts and talents.*

6. Finally, children learn by example. If your grandchildren have seen fighting and poor self-control, it's no wonder that that's what they've learned. *You can show your grandchildren a better example.*

The quiet child

Children show they are hurting in different ways. Some children are quiet and obedient. They work hard in school. At home, they try hard to please others. They seem so "good", it's hard to believe anything's wrong. Yet the quiet child may be hurting as much or more than one who acts wild.

If you have a grandchild who seems never to cause any trouble, that child may still need help. It may be that your grandchild is keeping feelings of hurt and anger all bottled up inside. Without help, those natural feelings can grow and get worse. Children who suffer in silence may later be at risk of drug abuse, health problems, or even suicide. Girls especially may later, as adults, have trouble avoiding and defending against an abusive partner.

Just about any child who's lost a parent or had a troubled relationship with one will need extra help to thrive in the future. The same things that help an unruly child will also help a quiet one. Love, patience, and understanding. Rules and structure, lovingly but firmly applied. Good medical care. Counseling by a mental health professional. Help with school and learning. Teaching by example. Letting every child -- but especially a quiet one -- know that it's okay to express feelings of hurt and anger.

Teaching with praise. The best way to help improve your grandchild's behavior is to offer praise whenever the child is doing well. Don't wait for big things to make a big fuss over. Instead, try giving a constant stream of praise and attention for little things. Like:

- "I like how you're looking at that book. Want to look together?"
- "That's nice that you're playing a game together."
- "Good for you for sitting down to do your homework. Need any help?"
- "Your teacher said you listened in class today. That's great."
- "Thanks for putting the plates on the table. Now let's try the forks and spoons, please."

All this praise helps any child, but may be especially important for your grandchildren. A child who's been through trauma loses feelings of self-worth, and praise helps to bring them back. Praise also tells your grandchildren what's the right way to act -- something the child may never have been taught.

Look again at the examples above. Every one of those statements praises a child for a good start or a good try. The child is praised from the very moment of *looking* at a book, not after hours of reading. The child is praised for *listening* in class, whether or not it resulted in a good grade.

Again, this is good for any child, but extra important for your grandchildren. Because of their past experiences, they may not be able yet to behave well for more than a minute or two at a time. You'll have to "catch" them being good, and praise them right away. With time and lots of praise, they'll learn to stay on track longer.

When children misbehave. What about the times when your grandchildren behave poorly? What should you do then?

First, make sure your grandchildren know the rules. You may think it's obvious that children shouldn't hit, steal, or throw things. But maybe those things were a regular part of your grandchildren's old life. If it helps, make a sign with the five or six most important rules in your house. Make sure the rules say what to do as well as what not to do. For example, "Use words to solve problems, not hitting" would be a good rule. Try to keep your list short, with only the most important rules.

It's very important that you don't spank or hit your grandchildren in any way. To a child who may have been abused, physical discipline just feels like more abuse -- and almost always makes things worse.

Explain to your grandchildren what happens if a rule is broken. Then keep your word -- calmly and politely. Sometimes the result will happen naturally. For example, suppose you have a rule, "Homework first, play later." If your grandchild scribbles instead of doing homework, playtime won't come. (Do break for dinner and bedtime.)

With other rules, you may have to make the result happen. If a child hits, for example, you might put the child into a "time out" -- a quiet time away from playthings and other children. Many experts recommend one minute of "time out" for every year of the child's age. So a ten-year-old would have a ten-minute "time out" every time he or she broke an important rule. Your response needn't -- and shouldn't -- be harsh. The important thing is that it happen every time.

Whining, arguing, and other ways to drive you crazy.

Chances are, your grandchildren have dozens of less serious habits which can drive you up a wall: whining, arguing, burping, name-calling, slurping food, and so on. Believe it or not, the best thing to do is ... nothing.

Doing nothing is your best bet at stopping irritating behavior -- *but only if you are also remembering to praise good behavior.*

The reason this works is simple. Your grandchildren want attention. Quite likely, if they've been neglected, they're starved for it. If you say nothing when they're squabbling, but lavish praise on them when they play together nicely, they'll learn to play nicely. Then they'll get the attention they want -- and you'll get the behavior you want.

If this sounds easy, it's not. In fact, most of us do just the opposite. When the kids are quiet and all seems well, we don't want to "rock the boat". Then, when the kids act up, we have plenty to say. "Give that back to Jimmy. Don't call your brother a 'pig'. QUIT SHOUTING!"

With practice, though, the method works. Just remember: 1) praise the good; 2) ignore the not-so-good; and 3) enforce rules against the truly wrong. It's a type of structure your grandchildren have probably never had, and should help.

A small number of children who've been abused or neglected cannot respond to this approach. They've become too afraid to seek even good attention. If you try this method and it doesn't help, a mental health counselor may be able to help you find ways that will.

What about counseling? Your grandchildren have been through a lot. They may be filled with all kinds of feelings: anger, sadness, fear, confusion. A counselor can help, meeting with your grandchild regularly, perhaps once or twice a week. That regular session is a chance for the child to work through feelings about all that has happened. A good counselor will listen, ask questions, and offer ideas. Counselors also use play, drawing, and stories to draw children out and help them to feel better.

> **Most children who have had a troubled relationship with parents can benefit from counseling with a mental health professional.**

A good counselor can work with you to help your grandchild to heal and to grow. That team approach can also take some of the pressure off you. For example, if your grandchild seems angry a lot, a counselor can help the child with those feelings. Then, if there's a blow-up at home, you don't have to fight it out. You can say, as calmly as possible, "I understand you're angry (or hurt or sad). Maybe you could talk about it with Mrs. Smith next Wednesday."

Types of counselors. Clinical social workers often have experience working with children who've been abused or neglected. They are trained to work with families, and can be a very good choice. Look for the initials "MSW" or "LicSW" after the counselor's name. A psychologist ("PhD") or a school counselor ("EdD") may be a good choice if your grandchild also needs work around school issues. If your grandchild has serious medical problems *and* serious mental health problems, you may want to consider a psychiatrist ("MD").

Types of counseling. Your grandchild might benefit from:

- **Individual therapy.** Your grandchild would meet one-on-one with the counselor. Individual therapy gives a child lots of adult attention, and may help the child to feel safe.

- **Group therapy (or support group).** Several children with something in common meet with one or two counselors. A group might be, for example, "Children being raised by grandparents" or "Children who were sexually abused". Group therapy can help children feel less alone, and let them learn from others.

- **Family therapy.** Members of a family who want to get along better meet with a counselor. Family therapy can also help the adults in the family to help the children with their problems.

Usually, before a child starts any counseling, there's one or more meetings when a counselor meets with the child to try to learn what the child needs. That's a good time to talk with the counselor about what type of counseling will help your grandchild most. Sometimes a combination works well, such as individual therapy once a week, and a support group twice a month.

Paying for counseling. If your grandchildren are covered under any health insurance plan you have, mental health services may be covered. If not, you might want to apply for Medicaid, the no-cost government-sponsored health coverage. For more information on applying for Medicaid, see Chapter 3.

Grandchildren talk about counseling

At first I got mad at all the snoopy questions. Now I like going because I can act however I want. If I want to yell the whole hour, that's okay.

-- Robby, age 10

Wednesdays after school I go to this group of kids with families like mine. It's okay. Sometimes kids cry and no one's allowed to laugh at them.

-- Tina, age 9

[My counselor] really understands me. I can tell her anything.

-- Jennifer, age 13

Tell people to get their kids one counselor and stick with them. I hate getting someone new all the time.

-- Mark, age 12

Sometimes I'll be telling [my counselor] something and I'll feel really bad and want to cry or hit something. But she's nice and doesn't get mad. Plus my grandma says it helps me feel better the rest of the time. I think that's true.

-- Cory, age 10

Medical care. Regular medical care is crucial for every child. Yet, before living with you, your grandchildren may have hardly seen a doctor. If a grandchild is just coming to live with you now, you should take that child immediately for a visit with a pediatrician. If you already have a grandchild with you who hasn't yet had that pediatrician's visit, make an appointment today. There are three key reasons:

- **Immunizations (shots).** All children should get shots to protect them against serious diseases by age two. There are several different shots now which have to be given over a series of several visits (many more than when you were raising your children). Your grandchildren may not have gotten them all. You can start by finding out where your grandchildren got medical care in the past. Then have your pediatrician get any past medical records, and get your grandchild's shots up-to-date.

- **Possible past injuries.** Sometimes a grandchild will come to a grandparent, and no one knows of any past injuries. Yet a medical exam shows that the child was injured in the past, possibly by abuse or neglect. This is important to know, especially if the parent later seek custody. It also can make it clear the injury didn't happen when the child was with you. And if medical attention is needed, your grandchild will get it promptly.

- **Possible medical conditions.** Children who have been abused or neglected, or whose parents abuse drugs, are at increased risk for many medical conditions from asthma to AIDS. A full checkup, with a medical history, can help identify and treat any medical conditions. If all is well, it can help set your mind at ease.

Helping your grandchildren to succeed in school. School is your grandchild's job. While every child has different skills and different needs, most need help to do their best. A child who does well in school gets a head start on life. Children also tend to feel and act better at home if they're happy and making progress at school.

> **When children have problems at home, they often get behind in school.**

Before coming to live with you, your grandchildren may have missed lots of school or switched from school to school. Often, they may have gone to school so hungry and unhappy they couldn't think. They may have been afraid to ask questions at school, or may have acted up so much they've been branded as "troublemakers". They probably never have had anyone help them with homework.

One of the best things you can do for your grandchildren is to help them catch up in school. You can:

- Set a regular homework time, *before* play time.
- Ask your grandchild's school about after school tutoring.
- Read with your grandchildren every night at bedtime.
- Make a regular fun (and no-cost) outing to the library.
- Show your grandchildren how you use numbers every day. If you buy apples for $2.00 a dozen, help a younger child to count out 12, or help an older child to figure out how much each apple costs.

Working with your grandchild's school

Your grandchild's school is a key partner in helping your grandchild to learn. The teachers, the principal, and the guidance counselor can all play a role. Meet with them as often as possible. Ask how you can help. Then, if there is something you think your grandchild needs from the school, don't be afraid to say so. Talk together about how to solve any problems.

Your grandchild may have special learning or behavior needs which are not being met. If so, there's a lot you can do. Under federal law, every child in public school has the right to receive an education suited to his or her special needs. Ask that your grandchild be tested and a meeting set to decide what kind of class and services your grandchild needs to learn well. This is called an "individualized education plan", or "IEP". Ask if there is a form you need to sign to get the process in motion.

If you have legal custody of your grandchild, you will have the right to attend all meetings to make decisions about the IEP. (If you don't have legal custody, see Chapter 4.) Do go to the meetings, and feel free to speak up and offer your ideas. Nobody knows and cares about your grandchildren more than you.

Television and your grandchildren

With your grandchildren needing so much attention, it's tempting at times to let the TV be your babysitter. It's true that TV can entertain and even teach, but there are a lot of risks. First, most television shows are much more violent now, and have much more sex, than when you were raising your children. Commercials, which can fill nearly half the time, push alcohol, unhealthy foods, and more products than you can afford to buy. Finally, study after study shows that too much TV for children can lead to learning problems, lack of creativity, and behavior problems like punching and hitting. With your grandchildren already at risk for learning and behavior problems, that's a serious concern.

There are ways to keep TV a healthy part of family life. You can:

- Offer your grandchildren games, books, or other choices first.
- Limit TV watching to one or two hours per day.
- Take advantage of the many good children's programs on public TV, like "Sesame Street" and "Kidsongs" for toddlers, or "Bill Nye the Science Guy" and "Who Stole Carmen Sandiego?" for older children.
- If you have a VCR, rent a non-violent movie on the weekend to watch together as a family.

Hugging, kissing and snuggling. Every child needs love, and this is a good chance to give your grandchildren some of the safe, secure love they may have been missing. Even so, their past may put limits on what kinds of affection they can safely and comfortably enjoy.

> **One or more of your grandchildren may have been sexually abused in the past -- and you may not know it.**

Often children raised in a household affected by drug or alcohol abuse, violence or neglect are also sexually abused, by a parent, boyfriend, or neighbor. They may say nothing, knowing (or at least believing) that their parent can't or won't protect them. Girls are most often victims, but sometimes boys are, too. Children who have been sexually abused may be afraid to be touched or kissed, or may try to act "sexy", thinking that's what adults want.

If your grandchild has been sexually abused, counseling will be important. Also, basic privacy rules are good for all your grandchildren, even if you don't know of any sexual abuse. Try following these tips:

- *Do* hug and kiss your grandchildren, if they seem to like it.
- *Don't* insist on hugging or kissing if a child doesn't want to.
- *Do* explain, in a kind way, what parts of our bodies are private.
- *Don't* let even young children climb into bed with you.
- *Don't* let any adult flirt or joke about sex with a teen grandchild.

When children seem to split a couple apart. If you have a spouse of partner, you may find your grandchild treating each of you very differently. A child may act angry and mean with one grandparent, but "good as gold" with the other. It's a way of acting out the anger the child feels against a parent -- but keeping a feeling of safety, too.

"My granddaughter Sara used to treat me like dirt," says Donna, a pleasant woman in her fifties. "Then she'd go running to her grandfather. I had to learn to be firm, without losing my temper. But it was really Bob, my husband, who helped turn things around. He set a policy of *never* saying "yes" to her if I'd just said "no". He made it clear to her that he respected me, and expected her to show me respect. Slowly but surely, things started to change."

It's easy to be pushed apart as a couple when a grandchild plays favorites. Instead, try to band together. It will help you -- *and* your grandchildren. A few tips that may help:

- Try to agree on house rules and how to respond to the children -- or at least disagree in privacy, not in front of the grandchildren.
- If possible, take turns caring for your grandchildren.
- If a grandchild has chosen you as the "bad guy", don't blame yourself. If you're the chosen "good guy", make an extra effort to support and help your partner during this tough time.

Keeping your family life strong. Change can be stressful. When a child with special needs enters a new household, the entire family feels the strain. If you are single or widowed, you'll have a lot of weight on your shoulders alone. Don't be afraid to ask friends or other family members for help. A support group for grandparents raising grandchildren can also help you feel less alone.

If you have a partner, there may be strains on your relationship. Some couples have even separated under the stress of caring for grandchildren. It is very common for grandparents to disagree about the care of a grandchild -- especially if the grandchild has behavior problems. The stress is natural, and it's not your fault. Try to make decisions together, and to support and appreciate each other. No matter how busy you are, plan times for you and your partner to be together, away from the grandchildren.

Weathering the storms. One of the most confusing things about raising your grandchildren may be the ups and downs. Just when your grandchildren start seeming happier and more comfortable, they may suddenly act much worse. They may yell, swear, break things -- anything to get you angry. If you're like lots of grandparents, you'll wonder what you're doing wrong. But you're probably not doing anything wrong at all. A grandchild who acts up may be testing you, to see if you'll react (as parents may have) with violence or rejection.

These times will pass, but they make it extra important to find the support and help you need to keep your family life on track. Give yourself -- and your partner, if you have one -- credit for all you do well with your grandchildren.

Grandchildren talk about life with their grandparents

"I wouldn't be all that I am without my grandparents. They raised me and gave me love. Without them, I know I wouldn't have gone to college, and I doubt I would have been as happy a person."

-- Neil, age 24

"My dream is if Mommy and Daddy and Grandma and Grandpa and my brother and me could all live together in the same house."

-- Eric, age 5

"Every morning, Grandma gives me cereal or sometimes eggs. She helps me get dressed. I help her, too. She says I'm a big help.

-- Katie, age 7

"I do miss my Mom, but I like living with Grandma. Before I'd have to get the little kids dressed and change their diapers and stuff and give them bottles if they cried at night. Now Grandma helps and I go to school."

-- Tonya, age 11

"I love Grandma and Grandpa."

-- David, age 4

Grandparents talk about life with their grandchildren

"When I was raising my children, I loved their first steps, first words, first day of school. With my grandchildren, I look for other types of progress: first day without hitting, first night without a nightmare. What's surprising is how much happiness and pride I feel at those day-by-day changes."

"I can't say I feel happy, but I do feel blessed. I love my grandbabies. If I made mistakes with my own children, then this is my chance to do better."

"Oh, well, they keep me young, anyway, just trying to keep up with them."

"Sometimes I get frustrated at all the work I do, and nobody ever thanks me. Instead, I have to let the thanks come from inside me."

"I'll never really get over the sadness that my daughter is addicted to drugs. After awhile, though, I had to let go. Now I focus on my granddaughter. Caring for her is like nursing a little bird that fell out of the nest and got its wing broke. One of these days, I just know she's gonna fly. That's what keeps me going."

Raising grandchildren isn't easy. Grandchildren's needs, the problems of the parents, schools and doctors that ask for custody orders, and courts that make it hard to get them -- these are just a few of the many challenges. This book can help you to cope with these issues and more. It gives you information and ideas you need, and tells about people and services that can help. It may even help you to rediscover the joys that can come with the challenges.

About the author. Marianne Takas is the Executive Director of the National Foster Parent Association, a nonprofit association dedicated to improving the lives of children who have been abused or neglected, and those of the families who care for them. Ms. Takas has worked on behalf of children as an attorney, a youth worker, a parent, and a foster parent.

To get more copies. If you'd like a copy of this book, send $3.00 for mailing and handling costs to the National Foster Parent Association, 9 Dartmoor Drive, Crystal Lake, IL 60014. For bulk mailing rates, call (815) 455-2527.